



What Happens to Those Who Exit Jehovah’s Witnesses: An Investigation of the Impact of Shunning

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Abstract

Shunning and ostracism have severe impacts on individuals’ psychological and social well-being. Members of Jehovah’s Witnesses are subject to shunning when they do not comply with the stated doctrine or belief system. To investigate the effects of shunning, interviews with 10 former Jehovah’s Witnesses, ranging in age from 20 to 44 years old, were conducted; six male, six White, one Native American, one Black, and two Latinx. Transcripts were analyzed with interpretative phenomenological analysis for narrative themes pertaining to their life after exclusion from their former faith using the context of Jehovah’s Witnesses culture. Results suggest shunning has a long-term, detrimental effect on mental health, job possibilities, and life satisfaction. Problems are amplified in female former members due to heavy themes of sexism and patriarchal narratives pervasive in Jehovah’s Witnesses culture. Feelings of loneliness, loss of control, and worthlessness are also common after leaving. The culture of informing on other members inside the Jehovah’s Witnesses also leads to a continued sense of distrust and suspicion long after leaving.

Keywords Shunning · Ostracism · Jehovah’s Witnesses · Fundamentalism · Disfellowshipping · Familicide · Suicide

Lauren Stuart was a model, a mother, and a wife. After leaving Jehovah’s Witnesses (JW) to enroll her sons in college, she was shunned by family and friends alike. In 2018, she shot and killed her husband, three children, and herself in Keego Harbor, Michigan (Boroff, 2018). She left notes and messages detailing the pain shunning had caused her and the belief systems that had influenced her actions (Wright, 2019). This is not the only case of former JW members committing familicide. The Miller family from South Carolina, the Longo family from Michigan, and the Bryant family from Oregon were all JW members who were subjected to this tragedy (Frazier, 2003; Golgowski, 2019).

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JW is a Christian sect that began in the United States in the late 1800s. The current version of the religion holds that a worldwide Armageddon will occur in the very near future and that any nonbelievers alive at that time will be killed in an act of godly retribution. Members who choose to leave the religion due to moral or doctrinal objections are shunned by the community. Members who sin in the eyes of their congregation are shunned as well (Pietkiewicz, 2014). These beliefs have been cited as one underlying reason for the Keego Harbor familicide as well as additional cases of suicide among former members (JW Survey, 2014). Based on these cases, JW beliefs may be internalized and have the potential to have a strong influence on the mental health of former members, even long after they leave the congregation. Existing research examines the quotidian life of members or focuses on the contrast between life ‘inside’ this very insular organization and life after ‘adjustment’ to the outer world. Current research also examines the nature and type of pathological behavior by former members as well as the reasons many remain in this ‘high control’ organization despite the toll on their mental health. However, there are gaps in the research, especially regarding the exit point of former members. This paper focuses on the adjustment period directly after a person leaves JW and examines the connections between JW beliefs and the negative mental health outcomes of excommunicated members.

Beliefs

JW is a Christian fundamentalist religion based out of Wallkill, New York. The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society—the legal entity of JW—reports over 8 million members worldwide in 240 countries (Watch Tower and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2021a). However, studies examining member counts have found that the number of people identifying as JW to be 17.5 million (Lawson & Xydias, 2020). JW subscribe to a framework of fundamentalism, with strict obedience to doctrine required of all members. JW believe in the ultimate authority of the Bible, spreading their beliefs through evangelism and remaining separate from the world around them as God’s only true religion (Watch Tower and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1980).

According to the official JW website, jw.org, JW view the Bible as the inspired word of God (Watch Tower and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2021b). JW interpret predictions in the book of Revelation as meaning that the governments and religions of the world will topple and Armageddon will arrive (Watchtower, 2015a). JW construe this prophecy and others within the Bible to mean that the end of this world is to come in the very near future (Watch Tower, 2021b). This end will involve the deaths of all those not actively worshipping the God figure of the JW. Active JW will be rewarded after this genocide with a renewed earth with paradisiac conditions. Over time, people who are deemed to be redeemable who were not killed in the apocalypse will be resurrected to be taught the ways of the JW (Ringnes et al., 2019).

The only way to avoid being killed in the godly retribution is to follow the guidelines of the Bible in thought and actions as prescribed by the leaders of the Watchtower organization (Watch Tower and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1980). This includes control over negative thoughts as undesirable thoughts can cause an individual to fall out of favor with God. In order to protect their thoughts, JW are told to stop their thoughts and fill their mind with either prayer or a specific scripture. To maintain the rigor of control, members use dichotomous thinking as a mental shortcut. Thoughts, actions, and beliefs are either all

good or all bad. These projections also extend to people being either believers or not and adding the judgment of good or evil based on this simplistic ideology (Friedson, 2015).

A central portion of JW beliefs is the need to remain separate from the world outside of the JW community. Lyman Kellstedt and Corwin Smidt, who research high control beliefs, describes this tenet of fundamentalism as separation orientation (Kellstedt & Smidt, 1991). This is the idea that a believer should remain outside of world events, avoid fellowship with nonbelievers, and be distinct from the culture around them. In “Will You follow Jehovah’s Loving Guidance,” an article in the *Watchtower* magazine published by JW, believers are admonished to not “follow after the crowd” and to not allow the ideas of nonbelievers to influence them in any way, including through visual and written media (Watchtower, 2011). JW view the world of nonbelievers as “Satan’s World” and are warned to “avoid... them as we would a poison or poisonous snake” (Watch Tower and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1980).

This separationism extends not only to the nonbelievers JW may encounter in their daily lives but also to members who have broken the rules, or sinned, as well as those who were once members but have chosen to leave for religious or moral reasons. Those who fall into this category are shunned by all members of the religion, including their close friends and even family. Sins that could result in such shunning include but are not limited to “fornication, adultery, homosexuality, greed, extortion, thievery, lying, drunkenness, reviling, spiritism, murder, idolatry, apostasy, and the causing of divisions in the congregation” (Watchtower, 1988). Members who fall into this category are considered “disfellowshipped” and are not to be spoken to, contacted, or otherwise engaged by current JW. Amber Scolah was a former member who was disfellowshipped for having doubts about JW. A current member said to her, “Your eyes looked like the eyes of a dead person” after she left (Scolah, 2019). This statement encapsulates the attitude of disgust and separation that current members feel towards those who leave. They are conditioned to view those who leave the insular community as dead. This comes from the internalizing of the belief that the end of the world is soon to come and that the world has nothing worthwhile to offer (Watchtower, 2015b).

JW operate within a patriarchal structure; men occupy all positions of power, from the head decision makers at the top to those who oversee study groups and lead prayer within congregations. A 2021 *Watchtower* article titled “The Head of a Woman Is the Man” says, “Jehovah expects Christian husbands to care for the spiritual, emotional, and material needs of their family” (Watchtower, 2021). In this context, husbands and fathers are responsible for their family’s spiritual well-being and are therefore responsible for their survival in the apocalypse. This places severe pressure on families to act and behave in a controlled manner while in view of other members. Weishaupt and Stensland (1997) explain that men are required to openly act as the leaders of their households, and if they do not, the men will be seen as deficient by their fellow believers. The documentary *Disfellowshipped* gives an example of the consequences of this structure. One former member interviewed in the documentary shared the suicide note of his brother, a father who was also a member of JW. He had been feeling doubts about the religion and, not wanting to jeopardize his wife’s or children’s chances to survive the end of the world, he took his own life (Sangha, 2019).

Another core part of JW worship is spreading their beliefs through evangelism. JW are well known for their door-to-door preaching activities. The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society states that people are “count[ed] as Jehovah’s Witnesses only those who preach to others and who report that activity, not those who merely identify themselves as Witnesses,” emphasizing the importance of this worship practice (Watch Tower, 2021a). These preaching activities demand an enormous amount of time and energy of members. As such,

they curtail the time members would otherwise have to pursue careers, education, or enjoyable activities, serving as behavioral control.

The level of shunning and the willingness of family and friends to participate in this practice is more readily understood when taken within the context of the control JW are under on a regular basis. JW are required to attend regular meetings, often twice a week or more, as well as participate in monthly preaching work. Those who do not participate in the preaching work are considered to be “blood guilty”; due to the belief in Armageddon, those who do not preach are seen as withholding lifesaving information from their fellow humans (Watchtower, 2017). According to Weishaupt and Stensland (1997), the control Watchtower exerts goes beyond the worship practices of believers. He notes that the writings in publications are worded as suggestions but are actually regulated rules, and the locus of control resides not with the individual but is fully within organizational oversight. In a study on current JW, it was noted that they commonly referenced needing to set aside their current goals, needs, wants, and desires in order to pursue the preaching work and other such worship activities (Ringnes et al., 2019).

Independent thinking is discouraged, referred to as a trap and a snare (Watchtower, 2006). Members are not permitted to attend other places of worship, attend higher education other than what is necessary for job placement, read any material critical of the Watchtower organization, or communicate in any form with former members. This prevents ideas from the outside world or doubts from specific members from entering the congregation. According to Hassan, a therapist that works with former cult members and the founder of Freedom of Mind (an organization that helps cult victims and survivors), this level of information control falls under the model of mind control that is used by cults and high control organizations to retain their members. Within the JW belief system, “[M]embers are taught to reject rational analysis, critical thinking, and doubt” (Hassan, 2018). By creating a model of thought where critical thinking is a negative skill, language is used as an additional control mechanism.

In the JW belief structure, thought is not differentiated from actions. Sinful thoughts are viewed as sinning, and consideration of a doubt is aligned with hating God. Thus, the control over thought and information translates into control over action. The willingness to cut off a person who has sinned is a result of the control JW are conditioned to relinquish. As a current JW member stated in a previous study, “How can I be someone’s friend if he is an enemy of my best friend?” (Pietkiewicz, 2014). The participant here is speaking of a disfellowshipped person as an enemy of God for having made an error in relation to JW regulations.

Ostracism is a form of heavy psychological pain that has been extensively studied. Williams (2009) determined that ostracism, or shunning, threatens four basic social needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. Shunning removes a person from their identified group, threatening belonging, and creates feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, threatening self-esteem. Shunning keeps the group in control, and self-efficacy is removed from the ostracized individual. If the individual’s identity is intertwined with belonging in the group, shunning can disrupt their sense of empowerment and meaning in their life (Williams, 2009).

Shunning within the JW congregation structure is complex. Due to the high level of involvement expected from members and the separationist ideology prevalent in the community, members’ social supports and families are within the JW circle. When shunned, members lose their families, their friends, and their entire social network, usually without anything outside of the congregation to fall back on. This level of cumulative shunning has been shown to “generate great psychological distress” (Zamperini et al., 2020). Due to the negative light cast on higher education and people outside of the organization, believers are

indoctrinated to fear the outside world. This compacting of psychological distress lowers the level of resilience and leads to impaired emotional and social functioning (Williams, 2009).

Familicide is a rare event with tragic consequences. Familicide is here defined as the murder of a spouse and at least one child (Liem et al., 2013). Familicide perpetrators have been studied extensively, and a profile of potential perpetrators has been developed. Comparing the structure and belief systems of JW with these profiles reveals the dangerous potential of the JW structure and why some members have severe mental health outcomes after leaving the JW.

People who commit familicide are often operating from a patriarchal mindset. Within this structure, the head of the household is fully responsible for the family and is not individuated from the rest of the family (Sachmann & Johnson, 2014). This framework is reflected in JW beliefs. The actions of the parental figure directly determine the survival of the entire family in the supposed apocalypse. The patriarchal ideal is also a determination of control over one's family. When an individual's locus of control is external, attempts are made within the individual to manage that loss of self-control through self-harm or attempts to control another individual to re-establish the sense of efficacy (Lam & Chung, 2017; Mailloux, 2014; Troya et al., 2019). In religions such as the JW, the religion controls the incoming information, behaviors, and emotions through dichotomous classifications and shunning. The fight to maintain a sense of control can lead to domination over family members and reliance on patriarchal values.

A 2014 literature review of familicide occurrences found that a key perpetrator motive was immortality control (Mailloux, 2014). In Lauren Stuart's last videos, she discussed the need to protect her family from the coming apocalypse. Due to the belief that those who die before the end of the world will be allowed to come back to life, she believed the only way to save her family from her sins was to kill them before the end (Fade & Cedars, 2018). This fits the profile of familicide perpetrators who attempt to protect their family from an overwhelming feeling of loss through death (Mailloux, 2014).

Method

JW beliefs and the loss of community after shunning have a similar structure to the key motives and profiles of perpetrators of familicide. Familicide, however, is a rare occurrence. The structure of the JW religion and belief system may have potentially poor psychological outcomes. The purpose of the interviews that were conducted for this study was to determine the impact of these belief systems and the specific loss that shunning entails on former members. The participants were recruited through ex-JW internet forums.

The JW experience was first examined through news stories, first-person accounts, and JW publications that are publicly available online. The search focused on the specific beliefs and policies regarding shunning, views of former members, and the potential effects of those views. Due to the lack of literature on JW after they leave the religion, it was important to gather accounts from the individuals themselves. This research was approved by the Eastern Connecticut State University institutional review board in April, 2021 (OHRP IRB00005900). After IRB approval, a request for participants was posted on the Ex-JW subreddit as well as on several Facebook-based support forums.

Due to the vulnerability of the subjects and the need to protect their identities, a waiver of a written signed informed consent was obtained; participants gave verbal consent

after a review of the information sheet for the study. After the initial contact and review of the information sheet with the participants, virtual interviews were scheduled with the researcher. These interviews were conducted between April 5, 2021, and April 21, 2021 over WebEx, due to the global pandemic and the geographic spread of the participants. The virtual interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and were carefully transcribed by the researcher. Individual interviews were conducted over a 60- to 90-min period. Questions were left open-ended and focused on themes such as their personal exit experience, whether they had received any backlash from current members for leaving, including shunning, and the nature, type, and extent of support they had while adjusting to life without the JW religion. Using a semi-structured interview format, some examples of questions that were asked are: "Tell me about your experience leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses religion," "What emotions did you feel at your point of exit?" and "Were you dependent on any current members for basic needs at your point of exit?" Interviewees were asked follow-up questions to expand on any pertinent themes and were all offered an opportunity at the end of the interview to express any additional thoughts that they had about their exit from the JW.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), using a bottom-up technique for this understudied population. IPA is an established narrative review technique that is designed for examining complex social and emotional issues (Alase, 2017). This technique emphasizes in-depth interviews, with a focus on the participants' lived experiences. Due to the complexity that accompanies the nature of lived experiences and in order to achieve the depth necessary for IPA, a sample size of 2 to 25 is recommended (Alase, 2017). The technique involved reviewing for narrative themes and incorporating reported experiences into the context of the overarching JW culture. Interviews were read and analyzed by the researcher. Analysis was done by reading through each interview multiple times and coding each transcript into themed chunks that represented each participant's lived experiences. This was done by hand.

Participants

The ten participants were provided with an information sheet and gave verbal consent to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted over WebEx videoconferencing with English-speaking participants. They ranged in age from 20 to 44 years old, with six male participants and four female participants. Six were White, one was Native American, one was Black, and two were Hispanic. For the purposes of this paper, participants were assigned coded names to maintain anonymity. Participant demographics and brief case descriptions can be found in Table 1.

Objectives

The purpose of this paper was to obtain and compare the personal lived experiences of former JW. The goal was to provide a detailed account of members' experiences of leaving the religion as well as to look for commonalities between the experiences of ex-members to inform future research directions concerning this high control group.

Table 1 Demographics of study participants

Coded Name	Age	Location	Time out of Jehovah's Witnesses	Left Voluntarily*	Married
Al	43	Southern US	More than 5 years	Yes	Yes
Ben	31	Southern US	Less than 5 years	No	Yes
Cam	23	Western US	Less than 5 years	Yes	No
Diane	23	Western US	Less than 5 years	Yes	No
Eric	44	UK	Less than 5 years	Yes	Yes
Frank	23	Western US	Less than 5 years	No	No
Gina	44	Southern US	More than 5 years	No	No
Hellen	40	Midwestern US	More than 5 years	No	Yes
Iris	26	Midwestern US	Less than 5 years	Yes	Yes
James	27	Midwestern US	Less than 5 years	Yes	Yes

*Participants were coded as having left voluntarily (disassociated) if they initiated the choice and made the first contact with the congregation heads and if they did not mention the risk of disfellowshipping or reproval in their interview

Results

Shunning and communication control

One sister said we don't want anything to do with worldly people. We don't want to give people an indication that we want to spend time with them because [we] need to spend time with brothers and sisters. (Eric, 44, disassociated)

It's in this level of complete and utter abandonment, so it's very shocking even to people who are very well adjusted, and Witnesses are not well adjusted. (Diana, 23, disassociated)

Now my dad has had zero contact with me. My mother on the other hand, in the three years that I've been out, I've probably spoken [to her] like four times. The very first time I went to her place, crying, because I . . . "I just want you guys to talk to me." And then my mom was like, "You know what you must do to come back." (Frank, 23, disfellowshipped)

As demonstrated in the above statements, shunning has a deep impact on former members. Current members are not to have communication with those who leave the religion. Once a person leaves the JW religion, they are relegated to the status of an outsider. People who are not members of the religion are deemed selfish, cruel, manipulative, and insincere. Even when communication occurred between members and former members, it was emphasized to participants that further communication, attention, or attempts to reconnect would only be permitted on the condition of the participants returning to the religion. For instance, Frank was told that he would always be welcomed back to the family home if Frank started worshiping actively again. Other participants were sent text messages from current members, formerly identified as friends of the participants, saying that they could only reconnect, answer the phone, or communicate in any way if the participants became active members of the religion again. This conditional willingness to accept the participants as sons, daughters, and friends is evidence of emotional manipulation. The

exploitative nature of these communications is a core piece of the shunning practice and contributes to poor connections with others after former members exit the JW.

Information control

I was scared to death to look at opposing viewpoints. I thought I was gonna be taken over by Satan. (Helen, 40, disfellowshipped)

It was revealed that my wife was following [an ex-witness] on Instagram, and a Witness who was concerned about our spiritual weakness went through over 400 accounts, and on the surface [the ex-Witness] account is not obvious she was connected to the Witnesses, so they were doing some research, she found out she was an ex-Witness, sent it to the elders. . . . Since that point, my parents have talked to me three times, but everyone else has cut us off. (Ben, 31, disassociated)

I am looking around if these people knew what I was thinking, they would turn on me instantly, all these people who were smiling and happy to see me when I got here would hate me if they knew what I was thinking and that's a scary feeling because I felt I am not safe here [after the first meeting they attended while questioning their faith]. (Ben, 31, disassociated)

I stumbled upon the Reddit at work on my phone. Until the next morning, instead of going to the meeting, I was on between Reddit and my computer like, I would like, cross-checking everything, and at first, I was like no, no no, no no no no no no no no. Like this cannot be possible, it cannot be that all of these things are lies. And then I was like, you know what these are like, a bunch of like angry apostates, right? They're all angry and bitter jealous apostates. I'm going to look at one topic. Just one. (Diana, 23, disassociated)

Psychology is banned. Any kind of advanced biology is banned. Any kind of advanced history is banned. Philosophy is like studying Satan. . . . My dad was giving a comment while we were talking about higher education in one of the publications. [He said], "Kids go to college, and they learn about philosophy, and they learn about psychology and sociology, and they learn all these lies." (Cam, 23, disassociated)

Information control and emotional control enforced by a religious organization creates a dynamic of fear and powerlessness. Fear is conditioned through required attendance at meetings of Witnesses every week, required reading of publications, and regular encouragement to keep the congregation clean through reporting and subsequent punishment of sinful behavior. Fear conditioning prevented participants from being able to explore their faith with all the available information, making informed decisions difficult. The culture of informing on other members leads to distrusting other members of society and the world for years to come. Participants overwhelmingly reported a lack of trust in people, organizations, the news, and institutions. Several participants linked their distrust directly to the culture of the JW. They expressed the need to suppress their own thoughts, ideas, and doubts about the religion to maintain relationships with their parents, siblings, and children.

Armageddon mentality

If you think the world is going to end, you are not worried about long-term debt, I can just make minimum payments because the world isn't going to last another

five years. I don't need a savings account, . . . when you are constantly being told this world, this system, can't last five years . . . I don't need to pay this off because in five years everything will be in ruins. (Ben, 31, disassociated)

I see things on the news and you're battling with your mind as to whether it's, whether Jehovah's Witnesses have it correct . . . so you're always battling with emotions as to whether we've made the right decision. (Eric, 44, dissociated)

My mother has been a hardcore believer that the end is coming tomorrow, so she never saved money. (Gina, 44, disfellowshipped)

I remember seven years ago, another one of the governing body member talks, saying if you're not doing all you can in service then you're considered blood guilty. And you will not make it through Armageddon . . . so I've known since I was five years old that I would die during Armageddon. (James, 27, disassociated)

A common concern among participants was their lack of financial support after their exit from JW. Participants reported that saving for the future or making material gains in this world is seen as heresy as that would imply that one did not believe Armageddon would occur. The culture of the JW religion discourages higher education, likening it to the devil. Members are also discouraged from seeking promotions or better job opportunities, in part due to the belief that the end of the world will come soon. Compounding their lower earning potential, JW are discouraged from thinking about their future in the current world as doing so would imply they did not believe the end would come soon, which would be heresy. Gina left the JW a few decades ago, but as the only member of her family with a college degree and a full-time, lucrative career, she lives with and supports her parents and siblings. While she lives on the same property as her believing family, she is not spoken to or communicated with unless it related to essential household matters, and she is in a state of full shunning from the congregation Gina had belonged to for decades as a member. This is a burden on Gina. Now, with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, her family has quit their jobs in anticipation of Armageddon.

Other participants expressed struggling with the belief that the world is ending. Several participants left the JW during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the year 2020, there were also widespread wildfires, political unrest, and economic downturns. Members of JW are taught to look for these events as signs that Armageddon has arrived. Participants all reported feeling unprepared for life in a world that keeps spinning. Participants who had not felt invested in the religion before leaving felt that they had been prepared for dying, and existing in a life that continues has required mental adjustments and steep learning curves. Ben stated that because of his lengthy indoctrination around the short future of the existing world, he learned to view the world through a short-sighted lens. Recovery from membership required him to learn to set goals and develop the ability to conceptualize a reality 10, 15, or 20 years in the future.

In addition to the temporal adjustments, some participants reported dealing with shame both during and after their exit from the JW. Participants Iris and James reported that a strong tenet of JW was evangelism. They were told that if they did not preach to everyone they met, they would be personally blood guilty for those people's lives in Armageddon. This led to feelings of shame when trying to interact with coworkers and others in day-to-day life while following social norms about not discussing religion.

Emotional regulation

You think not having boundaries is normal. You [are] not even allowing yourself space for any . . . emotion that is not a positive emotion. [My therapist] had to give me a list of feelings. . . . I remember I was embarrassed because . . . I'm like a child. . . . I don't know how I feel. (Diana, 23, disassociated)

As a Witness, you are told to fantasize constantly; don't think about now—think about the Watchtower study, think about the future, think about the paradise . . . nothing is enjoyable, nothing is interesting or enjoyable, everything is gray mush, because you're not thinking about it, you aren't supposed to enjoy it now because you are imperfect and you are comparing it to some ideal fantasy. (Ben, 31, disassociated)

Participants also reported that they felt their emotional intelligence and emotional skills were stunted. Participants discussed their suppression of so-called negative emotions throughout their membership in the JW. Some related it to the idea that unfaithful people would be destroyed in Armageddon and that negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and grief were associated with not having enough faith. Diana discussed how she could not differentiate between her feelings of anger, sadness, disappointment, and other similar emotions, to the point that she now carries a card with the names of emotions, given to her by her therapist. The deeply conditioned beliefs of a soon-to-come Armageddon creates members of society who have extreme difficulty functioning in day-to-day life.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to gather personal lived experiences of former JW during the period of their exit from the religion. Many of the participants were actively exiting the religion during the pandemic, giving real-time emotional response and experiences, while others had been out of the religion for years, allowing for retrospective comments and comparisons to established life outside of the religion, thus meeting the study objective. Additionally, interview questions focused on the social services that former JW members relied on when they exited and the level of support they received after leaving from both ingroup and outgroup members.

Shunning and communication control

Examinations of the doctrinal component of the JW religion have shown unity and cohesion of congregation meetings and ceremonies across several locations (Rota, 2022). Cohesion among practicing members has also been demonstrated by Ringnes et al. (2019), who found current members used consistent and repetitive language when speaking to interviewers. The emphasis on ritualistic behaviors and the homogeneous use of language limits what members can discuss with each other and those outside the religion (Ringnes et al., 2019). The uniformity of beliefs, actions, and attitudes means that the enforcement of shunning practices as well as reactions to shunned people are also consistent across former JW members, as demonstrated by the current study.

However, other studies have found differences between individual experiences when focusing on the individuation process of exiting JW members (Testoni et al., 2019).

Differences were found in the beliefs and attitudes of former members, depending on factors such as stage of the transition, how they entered the JW religion, and how they exited the religion. On the other hand, Testoni et al. (2019) did find that the majority of their participants experienced anxiety and threat when exiting the JW religion. The participants in the current study expressed similar difficulties and sense of betrayal accompanying their exit, whether it was voluntary or not.

Similar to past research, participants overwhelmingly spoke about waking up from their indoctrination (Pannofino & Cardano, 2017). This led to their feeling lied to, manipulated, and deceived. The deception was rooted in the feeling of being lied to by the congregation, the general doctrine, and the fallibility of congregation and religious leaders. JW members are encouraged to prove their faith to themselves through rigorous Bible study. At the same time, members are strictly forbidden from doing research on the religion using external sources, such as the news, online forums, or even publications by JW that have been taken out of circulation, leading to the control of information that can be accessed by JW members. Outcomes of viewing such material included being excommunicated or disfellowshipped by the church and shunned by family and friends. According to jw.org, this is to protect current members from being swayed by angry and bitter former members (Watchtower, 2014).

Among current Witnesses, past studies have found that the idea that Armageddon will occur soon has a positive effect. For example, Bocci (2019) found that this belief moved one group to establish areas of environmental protection as well as to promote the health of the planet. The actions of these individuals were attributed to the fact they wanted the earth to be beautiful while they live forever in Paradise; maintaining beauty in the environment was part of that goal. Additionally, another study found that current JW members report feeling positive emotions when looking towards the future in Paradise, leading to a greater sense of well-being (Ringnes et al., 2019). While the results of the current study do not support positive outcomes related to this belief system, the reported experiences of current members may be modulated by the emotional control exerted over them, as reported by the participants in this study.

On the other hand, other studies have found that the implications of the direct expectation of positive emotions for a world-ending event can have a damaging impact on the state of the individual (Ringnes & Demmrich, 2020). It can lead to difficulty participating in mainstream society and increased cognitive dissonance (Testoni et al., 2019). By the time members are ready to exit the organization, they have often determined that while the exit is the best decision at the time, the outcome is death, leading to a suicidal profile for exiting JW members (Testoni et al., 2019). The idea that exiting JW members will die is directly related to the idea that nonbelievers and those who have turned away from the religion will perish in Armageddon.

Ringnes et al. (2019) found that current JW members hold the belief that the world is ending soon and that this has an impact on the emotions they outwardly portray. They found that current members' portrayal of emotions was uniform across their participants, with positive emotions when thinking about the future and negative ones when talking about the present. Similarly, the participants in the current study reported being told to focus on the future outcome of Armageddon, an eternal and perfect paradise with never-ending life. However, the proscription of emotions that is fostered during community meetings was reported to have an adverse impact on the participants' ability to process and recognize their emotions once they had left the JW and no longer had a prescribed regimen of approved emotions.

Additionally, participants reported a culture that fosters feelings of shame and portrays religious rituals as matters of life or death to its members; this affected them even after they had left the JW. After leaving, Iris and James struggled with shame over preaching at inappropriate times, and other participants reported feelings of shame over current relationships, their job performance, and various aspects of their lives. Shame can be a maladaptive emotion due to its all-encompassing nature and its association with depression and anxiety (Keller et al., 2015). The idea that people are guilty of murder if they do not follow doctrinal rules is another aspect of JW culture that contributes to heightened negative outcomes for former JW members.

Strengths and limitations

The current study contributes to the current body of literature by providing in-depth accounts of former JW members and their personal experiences of exiting the JW religion. Past research has examined individual and identity aspects of the exit experience, whereas the current study examines this experience through the influences of the doctrinal ideology on adjustment to non-JW life (Testoni et al., 2019; Zamperini et al., 2020). Additionally, past research has focused on the experiences of former JW members concentrated in specific locales with relatively homogeneous populations, whereas the current study was able to recruit participants of various ethnicities and ages.

The current study also has several limitations. Participants were recruited from online social media forums for former JW members. The selection process was not random and relied on voluntary self-identification. Participants in such forums may be more reactive and polarized than the general population of former JW members (Farrell et al., 2008). Additionally, the interviews were conducted over a period of 60 to 90 min. IPA standards require one hour or more for sufficient interview depth (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Further depth could be obtained with lengthier interviews and interpretation being done by more than one researcher. Lastly, not all participants included in this study were actively exiting from the JW religion. Thus, this report contains some retrospective accounts that may not be as accurate as descriptions of current experiences (Bayen et al., 2007).

Future directions for research

The current study should be replicated with a larger sample size and could include participants from multiple nationalities to improve generalizability to more members of JW. Additionally, this study recruited from two social media sites. Further research could use alternative recruitment methods to achieve a group with less homogeneous views on their exit from the religion. Another suggestion for future research would be for clinical researchers to examine former members from a psychopathology perspective, looking at the impacts of acute and long-term stress resulting from leaving the JW religion. An interesting finding from this research was that many participants reported that they were “lucky” to have made the choices and steps to execute a successful exit. However, many of these choices were deliberate. I suggest that more research could be done to examine the locus of control of former members, as their cognitive and emotional processes may be being interfered with due to other beliefs and policies of the religion and may be contributing to negative outcomes after their exit. Additionally, eschatological beliefs, or beliefs that the world will end, are not unique to JW. Future research could also examine similarities between ex-JW members and members of other similar high control groups with doomsday prophecies, such as

Latter-day Saints, Scientology, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Christadelphians. This would provide more generalizability regarding the impacts of shunning on ex-members. Expanding the research on this topic would offer a greater understanding of religious psychology.

There is a large gender gap among the JW. According to Pew.org, 65% of the members are female (Lipka, 2020). Due to the patriarchal nature of the religion, preliminary results suggest that women are highly impacted by the beliefs and structures of the JW, but further investigation is needed. In JW literature, women are expected to be submissive to their husbands, not to give sermons, to assume a subservient role in prayer and other worship activities, and to not hold positions of responsibility within a congregation (Watchtower, 2021). This sexist culture also influences JW men to the point that they must actively work against it after leaving the religion. These gender differences should be explored further to examine the impacts of the culture on adjustment after leaving. The goal of this study was not to determine differences in the outcomes of former JW based on gender; however, future researchers should examine the reasons and outcomes for possible gendered differences.

Conclusion

The membership of JW is an understudied population; given its reported 8 million members around the globe, further examination of the effects of policies and beliefs on individuals would be beneficial. As of now, the only large-scale source of support reported by participants is a webpage hosted on Reddit, as discussed by the participants in this study. However, participants expressed the need for in-person support groups, college financial assistance, and clinicians trained in the unique circumstances of ex-JW members and religious trauma. They additionally expressed the need for assistance in learning life skills such as budgeting. As a high control organization, JW exerts far-reaching influence over its members. The policies and beliefs established by this religion have long-term negative impacts on former members' lives, particularly their psychological health and material prospects. Participants dealt with varying levels of fear for years after exiting and continue to struggle with trust.

The combination of the threat of Armageddon, the policy of shunning those who disobey Watch Tower policy, and the inequality between men and women in the religion leads to difficulty coping after leaving the JW. The minimal level of support available to former members leads to difficulty forming affirming and supportive relationships, low financial security, and emotional maladjustment. When combined, these difficulties match the profile for familicide perpetrators and support the hypothesis that ex-JW struggle significantly after leaving the religion. Creating support services for former members of high control organizations, such as basic financial courses, and awareness of manipulation tactics used by such groups would improve the lives of former members significantly and potentially prevent further familicides by former members.

Given the similarities between the outcomes of shunning, combined with the reported patriarchal nature of the group and the vulnerability of those who leave a high control religion, former JW populations fit the profile for familicide perpetrators and may be at high risk for suicide. The seriousness of these outcomes requires more in-depth qualitative, and quantitative analyses to further understand the implications of leaving a high control organization.

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Declarations

Ethical approval ECSU Institutional Review Board approved this study before commencement of the study in April, 2021 (OHRP IRB00005900).

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained verbally prior to interview to reduce paper connections to the participants of this study.

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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